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SUBJECT Panel Discussion/U.S.- Soviet Affairs

TED KOPPEL: With the cooperation of the Council on Foreign Relations, we have assembled a panel of leading and, I might add, very patient specialists on the Soviet Union to explore further the question of what lies ahead in U.S.-Soviet affairs.

Joining us live from the headquarters of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York is Dmitri Simes, Executive Director of the Soviet and East European program at Johns Hopkins Foreign Policy Institute; Admiral Bobby Inman, former Director of the CIA, now consultant to the House Select Committee on Intelligence; Winston Lord, a former State Department official who is now President of the Council on Foreign Relations; Leslie Gelb, national security correspondent for the New York Times; and Robert Legvold, Director of the Council's Soviet Project.

Admiral Inman, I'd like to begin, if I may, with you and to ask you whether indeed our intelligence community is that badly off when it comes to the issue of deciding or determining who's going to be next. Do we ever have any way of knowing?

ADMIRAL BOBBY INMAN: We do very well on military items, reasonably good on economic. And not only do we do poorly on political items, but we're likely always to do poorly against that closed society.

KOPPEL: Why is that?

ADMIRAL INMAN: Simply the enormous difficulty of trying to penetrate the Politburo itself.

KOPPEL: Is it then possible -- and let me throw this

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question open to anyone of you gentlemen. Is it then possible to talk about continuity?

Admiral Inman, why don't you...

ADMIRAL INMAN: You have continuity from the Politburo. One of the things that Brezhnev did, even when he edged out in front, was to keep a collective leadership. It may not be quite as stable as it would have been if Suslov and Kirilenko were still able to play roles, but there will be continuity.

KOPPEL: Give us an insight, gentlemen, if you would -- and at least three of you, I know, have served in high roles in government. Give us an insight as to what the process is now during an interim period like this in terms of regularizing or maintaining relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

WINSTON LORD: Well, I think, Ted, we have to project some consistency and reliability. I think at this point you shouldn't worry about trying to influence the succession, which I think is an impossible task. But I do think we should promote a general posture which makes clear to the Soviet Union that we're prepared for a more constructive relationship if they show restraint around the world and are willing to negotiate on arms control and other matters, but we will be firm if we have to be, if they're going to take a more confrontational posture. But make clear to the leadership, at least in the following months, that if they wish to follow a more constructive course, we're ready to join them in that.

KOPPEL: Dmitri Simes, do you want to pick up on that? What's going on in Moscow right now, do you think?

DMITRI SIMES: Well, Ted, I think that we don't know who is going to be Brezhnev's successor, partly because Politburo members don't know themselves. If they determined it in advance, the man probably would be ousted from the Politburo by Brezhnev, who would perceive this person as a threat.

But I do think that people now are involved in a rather intense power struggle, and relationship with the United States is not on their priority list.

So I think Mr. Lord is quite correct suggesting that this is not a time for major foreign policy initiatives. We should look open-minded, we should behave responsibly, we should project our reliability, but I don't think this is the time when Moscow would be willing to offer any olive branches to Washington or to accept any major arms control initiatives coming from Washington.

KOPPEL: Well, I was about to pose the question in a

slightly different way. Is the Soviet leadership at the moment even in a position to discuss anything, since you seem to be suggesting that they themselves may not quite know how this is all going to turn out.

SIMES: Well, you can see my view, that these are people who are preoccupied with running succession, with their power struggle. I do not believe that they are well-equipped at this moment to handle very complex political issues.

Also let me say this. They believe that [unintelligible] in relations with the American state. [Unintelligible] Soviet leader who would like to be identified too much with the policy of detente, with any constructive initiative in [unintelligible] the United States. It just could be damaging to him domestically.

KOPPEL: Mr. Legvold, what do you think is going to happen to detente? Is there any vestige of it left? Can, indeed, any new Soviet leader -- and I use the term new in, I suppose, in quotation marks. Can any new Soviet leader allow himself to be identified with that policy?

ROBERT LEGVOLD: There's no question but what a new Soviet leader would want to be identified with a policy of detente, will continue to emphasize that as a theme of Soviet foreign policy. But the fact is that relations between the United States and the Soviet Union are extremely harsh, are extremely deteriorated, and there's small prospect, as Dmitri Simes just said, that any new Soviet leader is in a position to take the kind of bold initiative that would get the relationship back on a more constructive track.

KOPPEL: So where do we go from here, then?

LEGVOLD: I think we have to expect an extension of the status quo, the current situation. I think it is accurate to see this leadership now moving into a period of great caution, slow movement, lack of bold initiative -- initiatives; an American Administration that is going to be consistent in its policy. Even though I think the tone with which it responds to Brezhnev's death is very constructive, nonetheless it's committed to a hard-line policy toward the Soviet Union, and it's not going to alter that policy because Brezhnev has passed. I think we have to expect a continuation of what we've seen for the last year or so.

KOPPEL: Les Gelb, do you think it's a mistake that President Reagan is not going to Moscow?

LESLIE GELB: Well, Ted, I don't think it's a terribly important question or interesting question who the next leader of the Soviet Union is going to be, whether it's going to be

Andropov or a triumvirate, or whatever, because the policy is going to be the same. And it's going to be the same whether President Reagan goes there. There's a tremendous continuity. It's not like the United States, when the choice between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan means a real choice in the direction of policy. Their policy is essentially going to stay where it is. It's an encrusted society, a bureaucratic society, a frightened one, an uptight one that's made a lot of decisions that's led them to a present, I think, fairly desperate economic situation. And they can't budge. And they're not going to be in the position of making terribly bold moves on the world arena until they get their power situation straightened out and address the economy. It's not like an election in the United States.

One further remark. The thing that strikes me about this is the interest in this country about Brezhnev's death. And I think it comes not from people's expectation that anything's going to change, but the sense that we in the United States and the Soviet Union are part of the same umbilical cord of survival. That's what's important to us.

LORD: I was going to say, Ted, maybe we should distinguish, though, between the next couple of months, or it may be six months, and what might happen over a longer period. If you look at previous phases in Soviet changes of leadership, there was a change after many months. And I leave that to my experts to analyze in more historical terms. But it seems to me that you have to sort out the immediate caution and possible paralysis and what this might mean over a five- or ten-year period.

LEGVOLD: I think that's a very important distinction, Ted. In the next four, five, six months, or maybe even for a large part of what remains of the Reagan Administration, you're going to have this slow movement, this caution against disruptive political succession, this absence of bold moves on the part of the leadership. But the succession is a longer-term process than the next six months. It's going to take two or three years for it to be finally sorted out. And in the course of those two or three years, the Soviet Union does face a very daunting agenda of problems at home, with Poland, Afghanistan, an uncertain international environment. And once the leadership begins to sort itself out, then we may begin to expect more substantial decisions on their part. And indeed it's only at that point that we may see the fruits or the consequences of whatever policy we now establish in these early stages of succession.

KOPPEL: Gentlemen, I'd like to take a break. When we come back I hope we can examine the question of whether this is indeed a period of opportunity, then, for the United States.

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KOPPEL: ...Admiral Inman, it strikes me that we're hearing a great deal about caution, about don't rock the boat. Is it just possible that the United States is being too timid at this time, and this is in fact a period of extraordinary opportunity?

ADMIRAL INMAN: I don't see it as a time of extraordinary opportunity. I would like hold back on going forward with proposals, if we've got anything else in the bag for arms control or work at trying to limit movement of weapons out into space.

On the military side, I would indeed support the idea of caution. This is not the time to make them more worried about their own stability.

I'd also make the point, Mr. Koppel, that the final vote on who's going to succeed power is probably going to lie with the Ministry of Defense and the KGB. And so all of those who hope to be the next number one are going to keep a close eye on those precincts. Don't expect any reductions in Soviet defense spending. You may see some reaction to change to more spending on defensive systems if we lead them in that direction. But it is not a time for major new initiatives, certainly not any that use force.

KOPPEL: Let me play devil's advocate for a moment. If this is a time of relative uncertainty for the Soviet leadership itself, if it is a time when they might not know quite how to respond or how to get the machinery to respond operating, why shouldn't we be a little more aggressive?

Well, go ahead, Admiral.

ADMIRAL INMAN: I don't buy that it's going to be a time of such uncertainty as far as working the day-by-day machinery. Each of those who would like to be the leader are going to be nervous about actions impacting on their future prospects of being number one. But there is great continuity in that government. And this little group that rules now is likely to have its hands on the levers of power at least for the next two or three years.

The time to look for significant change is when the next transition is made. We know far too little about the younger leaders who are going to take over. But I think then we're going to have a time of substantially greater danger, the prospect that as they look at that awesome power that they will have available to them, they may be more arrogant, less cautious about using that power than the current old Bolsheviks have been.

KOPPEL: Winston Lord, then perhaps a little less awed

of the danger of war, since they will not have experienced the Second World War and the 20 million dead with quite the same intensity that Brezhnev and his generation did?

LORD: Well, that is another factor.

I think another option they've got is to try to isolate the United States by working with Western Europe and playing on the peace movement there, on the one hand, and probing with China, on the other hand, and try to isolate us from our allies and our possible collaborators on the geopolitical scene.

KOPPEL: I'm sorry. Who whispered that comment there?

LEGVOLD: They'll work on both those lines.

GELB: Ted, I suspect that the United States is playing some sort of role in whatever maneuvering is going on in the Politburo now or has been going on in the last few months. That in one of these leaders trying to gain a position of predominance, they very well may bring relations with the United States into that argument and say, in order to gain support from the Soviet military or from the Soviet KGB, "Look, we need to take a harder line with the United States."

The speech Brezhnev gave a couple weeks ago was, in my way of thinking, a very tough line to the military, saying, "You're not going to get any further increases." It may be that in order to tip the scales inside, somebody might be saying, "We need to take a hard-line position with the United States."

And it's very important, for reasons such as that, that the United States be very careful in this transition period not to give anyone making that argument any more weight than he'll have already.

LORD: The issue is, it seems to me, Ted, what you're posing is do we just have a general posture of we're willing to have more constructive relations, or be firm, depending on their behavior; or do we have to run around and come up with specific concrete proposals, say in arms control or economics, which will give them something specific to react to. I think that's where the tactical differences arise between some of the analysts.

SIMES: I think, Ted, there are two questions. One what we should do, and one what we should not do.

I agree that we should not try to engage the Soviets in major new arms control initiatives. They are not prepared. But I think while there is no great opportunity, there is a great danger. Brezhnev invested a great deal of personal prestige and

clout in detente. It was easier to deal with him because we knew him better, he knew the United States better, and he was in a position to [unintelligible] the bureaucracy.

I think that his successors, at least initially, are going to be much more cautious in dealing with the United States.

I think it is very important for the Administration to stop talking about putting the Soviet Union on an ash heap of history, stop talking about prevailing in a protracted nuclear war. In short, there are few opportunities, but there are many dangers. And I hope that the Administration will be skillful enough to avoid them.

KOPPEL: Dr. Legvold, in the couple of minutes that we have left, begin to wrap up for us what effect, if any, you think Brezhnev's death has had, is going to have, in terms of this period of transition, on U.S.-Soviet relations.

LEGVOLD: I think Brezhnev's death, as a practical matter, has a very marginal effect on the character of U.S.-Soviet relations. Indeed, I think the process of political succession is going to be of secondary importance.

The shape of U.S.-Soviet relations is going to be determined by the interaction between the two countries. It's going to be shaped by the character of U.S. foreign policy, but the way in which that policy works its influence in international relations and creates an environment to which the Soviet Union responds, one way or another.

And in this spirit, it seems to me that the initial reaction of the Administration has been a very constructive and intelligent one, as I understand the Bernstein report earlier in the program. I think the idea at this point of restraining ourselves from disturbing moves or moves that would disturb the Soviet Union is important. I think toning down the rhetoric in the present moment is important. I think giving them the option of an improved relationship in the future is extremely important.

The basic course of the Administration, however, is a hard-line policy. And one can agree or disagree with this policy over the longer run, but that's what's going to decide the character of the relationship, not Brezhnev's passing or the particular character of the succession in the next several months.

KOPPEL: Winston Lord, only a few seconds left. Is there an infrastructure in place in the Soviet Union with which we can continue to deal on a daily basis?

LORD: Yes, I think there is, in terms of day-to-day issues. I think for bold new breakthroughs, I don't think we're going to see that for the next several months.

KOPPEL: All right. Gentlemen, I thank you very much for joining us....